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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 BEIRUT 001482

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [ECON](#) [KCRM](#) [PTER](#) [LE](#)  
SUBJECT: LEBANON: PM SINIORA: CABINET REAFFIRMS SUPPORT  
AGAINST MILITIAS, FOR ARMY

Classified By: Ambassador Jeffrey D. Feltman for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

SUMMARY

1. (C) Although details of the meeting make the LAF-GOL discussions sound tense, Prime Minister Siniora described as "very good" the seven-hour cabinet meeting on 9/24. The meeting focused, the PM reported, on stopping groups from across the political spectrum from rearming and tightening cabinet control over the army. Siniora called for Syrian cooperation before proceeding with a proposed EU border initiative. On the presidency, Siniora assessed that Speaker Berri has a concrete plan to ensure election of a compromise candidate such as Robert Ghanem, but may not yet realize that he will need cabinet support to do so. Siniora described a civil servant whom we have viewed as a key obstacle to telecom privatization as dedicated to state control over provision of public services. Finally, Siniora promised that Lebanon would transfer its initial contribution to the Special Tribunal on or before September 28. End summary.

TRIBUNAL FUNDING ON ITS WAY

2. (C) Prime Minister Siniora and his advisors Ambassador Mohammed Chatah and Rola Nouredine told Ambassador Feltman and Econoff on September 25 that Lebanon's initial contribution to the Special Tribunal would be paid on or before September 28. Siniora during the meeting called Finance Minister Jihad Azour to confirm that he had initiated a transfer of \$5 million to the UN for the Special Tribunal. Azour confirmed that he had authorized a treasury advance and instructed the Central Bank of Lebanon to initiate the transfer on September 26. Azour expected the transfer to be completed by September 28. (Note: Both the Justice and Finance Ministries have been very slow to respond on this issue, and only acquired the correct account information and communicated with each other after nearly two weeks of Embassy meetings and phone calls. End note.) Meeting with the Ambassador separately, Minister of Justice Charles Rizk insisted that his ministry had provided all the information needed to the financial officials for Lebanon's contribution.

CABINET REAFFIRMS SUPPORT  
AGAINST MILITIAS, FOR ARMY

3. (C) Siniora went on to describe the seven-hour September 24 security cabinet meeting as "a very good meeting," focused on authorizing the army to crack down on both majority and

opposition groups that are rearming. The cabinet is trying to move carefully and fairly without making any strong public statements; it asked the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) and the Internal Security Forces to investigate specific areas through which it believes arms smuggling is taking place, and to investigate all groups -- including the Future Movement -- suspected of rearming. Siniora also commented that military intelligence head Georges Khoury acknowledged to the cabinet that opposition groups are arming on a more aggressive scale than March 14 groups.

14. (C) Responding to the Ambassador's comment that some army officers seemed to view the cabinet session as a potential "tribunal," Siniora said that he was aware of the problem in perceptions. Thus, he met with LAF Commander Michel Sleiman one-on-one on September 23 to reassure him about the following day's meeting (in which Khoury, not Sleiman, represented the LAF). In addition, the PM used the September 24 cabinet meeting to emphasize cabinet support for the army.

In Siniora's view, this reassured Sleiman that, despite personal and political differences, the ruling March 14 coalition's support for the institutions of the state guaranteed its support for the army and for Sleiman as Commander. However Siniora insisted that the army provide the cabinet, as the ultimate authority in Lebanon, with more candid and complete information. Siniora demanded a full report of what happened in the last days of the battle at Nahr al-Barid; in return he pledged not to allow any investigation to impact the institution of the army or Sleiman's political ambitions.

15. (C) Siniora demanded more candid intelligence about Fatah al-Islam's (FAI) ties to Syria. He noted that initial reports to the cabinet had too many vacancies and omissions

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to be true. G-2 chief Khoury, who Siniora claimed provided different stories with varying degrees of opacity to differing listeners, eventually "got caught in his own web of lies." It was Siniora's objections two weeks earlier to Khoury's refusal to give a single straight story about G-2 discoveries that led to Khoury's complaints to the Embassy and others about March 14 witch-hunts against him, Siniora mused. Pressed by the contradictions in his own accounts, Khoury finally admitted to the cabinet that Syrian intelligence helped smuggle Shakr al-Absi into Lebanon and engineer a bloodless takeover of Fatah al-Intifada. But Khoury argued, after that initial help from the Syrians, Fatah al-Islam leader Absi subsequently worked on his own. Siniora believes the Syrians put the group in place to create disturbances that the Syrians could not be held responsible for.

16. (C) Siniora also rebuked Khoury for unprofessional behavior and lack of candor concerning the Hizballah phone network. The specific example Siniora related to a case widely covered in the Lebanese media of Khoury's G-2 interrogating and beating the Ministry of Communications employee who had first reported the existing of the parallel Hizballah cable system. Siniora insisted that Khoury apologize to the employee for an "overzealous interrogation."

While the cabinet agreed that the military's removal of the Hizballah phone network in Beirut was inadequate and should be extended to the south and the Biqa, Siniora offered no time line for when such a controversial move would actually be attempted. Siniora also assessed that Transportation and Public Works Minister Mohammed Safadi is approving Iranian permits to construct roads and other infrastructure in an effort to gain opposition support to become Prime Minister. This is shortsighted, however, because his Sunni base of support will not tolerate this cooperation with Iran. End note.

SINIORA PUSHING BACK  
ON EU BORDER INITIATIVE  
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17. (C) The Ambassador raised the ongoing smuggling problem across the Lebanese-Syrian border. Siniora over the last week noted that he had pushed back on pressure from Spain and France to solidify the proposed EU program to provide training and technical assistance to both Lebanese and Syrian border officials. Siniora has received only a vague outline of the plan from Spanish Foreign Minister Moratinos, and worries that the Syrians will use this as an excuse to pretend they are complying with international demands. Therefore Siniora told German Foreign Minister Steinmeyer his precondition for the program is Syrian removal of the military camps on the border (including Qusaya) through which they are smuggling people and weapons, and agreement to allow Arab or Muslim international observers. Steinmeyer in his September 24 conversation with Siniora agreed to raise Siniora's concerns at the EU Foreign Ministers' meeting in NY, and expressed common EU doubts that the Syrians really agreed to a plan, the argument Moratinos is using to resist modifications. Siniora noted that he had also talked with Moratinos as well as the French, Italian, and Portuguese foreign ministers to insist that he be consulted on the plan earlier rather than later.

BERRI WORKING BEHIND THE  
SCENES FOR A COMPROMISE  
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18. (C) On the subject of the presidential election, Siniora commented that Parliamentary Speaker Nabih Berri appeared less certain that he could elect a compromise president after Siniora reminded him that parliament requires cabinet approval of any constitutional amendment. Advisor Mohammad Chatah believes Berri is working on a plan in which he will eliminate key candidates from each side -- including Michel Aoun and Nassib Lahoud -- while worsening security conditions increase public pressure to find a compromise candidate. Siniora reiterated that he does not support amending the constitution to allow General Sleiman to be elected because it will cause all generals to set their sights on the presidency. Robert Ghanem is the most likely fallback candidate, Siniora noted, but will not be a strong-enough political player to resolve national issues. If such an agreeable but as-yet unproven compromise president is elected, Lebanon will still struggle to form a new cabinet and cabinet statement; neither will be as strong as in 2005.

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TELECOM DG SOCIALIST,  
NOT CORRUPT  
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19. (C) Ministry of Telecommunications Director General Abdel Menem Youssef was leaving Siniora's office as we arrived. The Ambassador used the occasion to raise our serious concerns with rumors of telecom-related corruption. Siniora described Youssef as "clean" but with a strong belief that the government should run public services. Youssef was in the PM's office to complain about Telecommunications Minister Marwan Hamadeh's son Kareem's corruption; a Hamadeh business partner owes at least \$500,000 to the GOL. While Youssef stopped doing business with the company, someone else at the Ministry reopened the contract, leading Youssef to seek the PM's support to take the case to court. Siniora noted that Walid Jumblatt has also asked him to raise this issue with Marwan Hamadeh, but despite the PM's pressure, Hamadeh continues on his questionable course. Youssef also told the PM he believed Hizballah radar is causing the persistent satellite interference of the last three weeks.

COMMENT  
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110. (C) Were the GOL-LAF relations not so plagued by charges of political bias on both sides, the Monday cabinet

meeting on security issues would be chalked up as an unqualified success: all ministers except one (Mohammed Safadi) attended, and all security agencies sent representatives (with the LAF and ISF intelligence chiefs in the lead). We have seen seven of the 17 ministers who attended, and all said that the discussions were unprecedented in their frankness -- and in reinforcing the concept that the security organs report to the civilian cabinet, not the other way around.

¶11. (C) But the deep political and personal mistrust that divides Siniora from Sleiman, however, will continue to hamper the ability of the GOL and LAF to engage in an honest assessment of Nahr al-Barid and the current security threat environment. The LAF Command will, we predict, continue to consider questions from the civilians as potentially hostile and politically motivated; LAF officers will thus try to divulge as little information as possible. Siniora, smart enough to see when he is being given the run-around and proud enough of his constitutional role to resent and object to the LAF's evasion, will suspect political motivation in the LAF's reticence. Ironically, we have a much greater chance of getting the LAF to be honest in its appraisal of the Nahr al-Barid fight than Siniora does. Unfortunately at a time when the security threat environment appears to be worsening, the LAF and March 14-dominated cabinet still eye each other warily rather than consider each other to be allies and part of the same government.

FELTMAN